Recognizing the need for the sport management field to contribute to the health of the population (or “population health”) not just through participant sport, but also through spectator sport, Inoue, Berg, and Chelladurai (2015) conducted a scoping study synthesizing the body of research examining the influence of spectator sport on population health. Beyond noting the paucity of empirical research in sport management journals and several gaps in the literature on this topic, Inoue et al. analyzed research across fields of study and identified nine research themes depicting the relationship between spectator sport and population health. These themes included: (a) event’s impact on physical impairment and mortality; (b) event’s impact on unhealthy habits and practices; (c) social psychological benefits of sport spectatorship; (d) effectiveness of health promotion programs; (e) event’s impact on crime, violence, and suicide; (f) event’s impact on sport and physical activity participation; (g) psychological impact of sport spectatorship; (h) role modeling effects of athletes; and (i) sponsorship and advertising of unhealthy products.

Chalip (2006) highlighted the dynamic role sport could have in population health if properly managed; however, subsequent research has failed to simultaneously inform research and practice by capturing the viewpoints of practitioners in both the sport and health fields. A consultation exercise with these practitioners constitutes a knowledge transfer mechanism by which the findings of an initial scoping study are translated and disseminated to stakeholders in the field (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005; Levac, Colquhoun, & O’Brien, 2010). Further, the consultation exercise is needed to validate Inoue et al.’s (2015) initial scoping study findings and determine the relative importance of the nine research themes as perceived by practitioners. Moreover, this exercise is crucial in identifying other research themes not recognized in the initial scoping study and ascertaining priorities and questions for future research (Anderson, Allen, Peckham, & Goodwin, 2008). Filling the practitioner and researcher gap can advance knowledge production and transfer in sport management (Irwin & Ryan, 2013; Weese, 1995). In order for this to occur on the current topic, it is essential that the viewpoints of professionals in the spectator sport and population health fields are brought into the discourse.

To conduct this consultation exercise, the research team conducted a web-based survey with practitioners in the fields of spectator sport and population health. Survey questions were created based on items used in past research examining practitioners’ perspectives of given research topics related to sport management (e.g., Casper, Pfahl, & McSherry, 2012; Sheth & Babiak, 2010). Email invitations were sent to at least one manager in each college athletics department in the “Power 5” conferences (i.e., Big 12, Pacific 12, Big 10, Southeastern Conference, and Atlantic Coast Conference). Directors in city and/or county public health departments where a professional sport team or Power 5 athletics department resided were concurrently invited to participate in this research. The collection of data from college athletics and public health professionals allows for comparison between both spectator sport and health fields to identify where agreements or disconnects exist. Following the suggestions of Fan and Yan (2000), various strategies for increasing responses, such as the use of a pre-notifications and reminders, were adopted. The survey was designed to collect both quantitative data through a set of 5-point Likert-scale items and qualitative data through open-ended questions. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and t-tests to examine how each of the research themes regarding the relationship between spectator sport and population health, as identified by Inoue et al. (2015), was perceived to be important by practitioners. In addition, the qualitative data were initially analyzed by a research team member to code responses and identify responses that did not fit into one of the nine themes. The other members then verified the coding to increase validity before accurate conclusions could be drawn (Goulding, 2002).

The study sample consisted of 110 individuals who provided usable responses, including 92 managers of college athletics departments and 18 directors of public health departments in the United States. These respondents worked
for organizations located in various regions and metropolitan areas varying in size. For athletics departments, the sample included managers from all of the Power 5 conferences. The quantitative data indicated that perceptions of the relationship between spectator sport and population health substantially varied between athletics and public health practitioners. Specifically, athletics managers described spectator sport’s impact on population health as more positive \((t = 4.04, p < .001)\) and as being of greater concern to their organizations \((t = 3.57, p = .001)\) than did public health directors. Regarding the perceived importance of the nine research themes discussed by Inoue et al. (2015), the most important theme identified by athletics managers was social psychological benefits of sport spectatorship \((M = 4.15, SD = .90)\), followed by psychological impact of sport spectatorship \((M = 3.41, SD = 1.02)\). In contrast, the theme “social psychological benefits of sport spectatorship” represented the least important theme for public health directors \((M = 2.72, SD = .96)\), who instead rated sponsorship and advertising of unhealthy products as most important \((M = 4.00, SD = 1.23)\).

The qualitative data confirmed and extended the quantitative results by revealing not only divergence but also agreement between college athletics and public health practitioners. For instance, there was concurrence that a spectator sport event’s impact on unhealthy habits and practices was a relevant issue to many organizations, specifically regarding excessive alcohol and tobacco use. While Inoue et al. (2015) found a relatively large number of academic studies on alcohol abuse due to sport spectatorship, participant responses indicate that efforts towards this challenge continue and new solutions from researchers are needed. Respondents further suggested that many college athletics departments and public health departments are disengaged with how their organization can contribute to population health. For example, several athletics managers expressed that their organization’s focus was more on revenue generation or that they did not have a program that contributed to any aspect of population health. Likewise, several public health directors noted that their departments did not have any policies or programs associated with local spectator sport organizations and events.

The most important contribution of this consultation exercise is to show that research topics perceived to be important differ between practitioners in spectator sport and health fields. For spectator sport practitioners, understanding the psychological and social psychological impacts and benefits of sport spectatorship constitutes the most relevant topic, which is consistent with growing research efforts within the sport management literature (Doyle et al., 2016; Inoue et al., 2015). For health practitioners, the promotion of unhealthy products through athlete endorsement and sport sponsorship is regarded as most important, although this topic is currently under-researched (Inoue et al., 2015). The findings indicate that both spectator sport and health practitioners have yet to adopt comprehensive programs and policies to leverage the health benefits of spectator sport events while reducing their detrimental effects. Overall, the current results reveal not only an enduring need for research to relevantly inform industry practice, but also an opportunity for sport management scholars to actively engage in the development and implementation of new practices designed to strengthen the relationship between spectator sport and population health.